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ONE HUNDRED SIXTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

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May 16, 2000

The Honorable Donna Shalala, M.D.
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Madame Secretary:

As you are aware, the Government Reform Committee conducted a hearing on April 6 regarding the dramatic increase in autism rates. On behalf of the Committee, I urge you to convene a panel of experts in autism, neurology, immunology, virology, histopathology, epidemiology and other appropriate disciplines to conduct a comprehensive Cochrane Collaboration style systematic review of the existing state of the science concerning the possibility that childhood immunizations can cause or contribute to the onset of autism.

We ask that this panel be an independent panel and that its members be free of conflicts of interest. This panel should include in its review, an evaluation of the existing literature and research, determine if there is enough existing science to make a clear determination, and provide a systematic evaluation to the quality of the existing body of research. The panel should also provide recommendations regarding research needs. I ask that the names, resumes, and conflict of interest forms of the proposed panel members be submitted to the Government Reform Committee in advance of the formalization.

At the April 6 hearing, testimony was presented by witnesses who postulated this link between childhood immunizations and the onset of autism. Other witnesses disagreed and testified that the scientific evidence does not support such a connection.

Like the witnesses, we also disagree on this issue. I believe that there currently exists evidence, both anecdotal and scientific, to indicate a causal connection between vaccines, their possible adverse effects and acquired autism and that more research needs to be conducted to further understand this issue. Representative Waxman believes that the scientific evidence does not support such a connection.

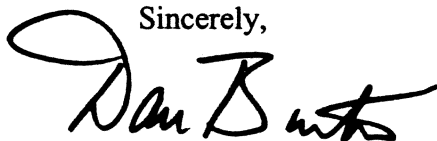
We agree, however, that an expert panel could help resolve these concerns and lay the groundwork for future research. It is important to determine whether or not enough research evidence has been accrued to make such a determination. It is also important to insure that we have a firm foundation in long-term safety studies in vaccines, which according to the Institute of Medicine does not exist. Because of the vital public health importance of childhood immunizations, as well as the growing concerns over the prevalence of autism in the United States, we believe that an expert panel of leading scientists and clinicians who do not have a vested interest in vaccine issues, should review all the available data regarding any possible connections between vaccines and autism.

As part of this work, we request that the expert panel obtain and evaluate the raw data, and where appropriate, tissues samples from the scientific witnesses that testified at the April 6, 2000 hearing.

Please provide an implementation plan and timeline by May 31. A full report to the Government Reform Committee on the findings of this panel is requested at the conclusion of the panel's investigation. An interim reports should be provided by December 31, 2000, and June 30, 2001 if the panel's work is not complete. Please provide monthly updates on the progress of the development of this panel and its progress. If you should have any questions, please have your staff contact Ms. S. Elizabeth Clay at 202-225-5074.

We appreciate your attention to this important public health issue and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dan Burton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a stylized "B".

Dan Burton
Chairman